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East Timor : how many people have died?

East Timorese believe between 100,000 and 300,000 people have died in East Timor in the last four years. Recent official Indonesian population figures for the territory appear to support these claims. This article is a summary of the February 1980 issue of *Timor Information Service*, which concluded that between 133,000 and 217,000 people (that is, between one fifth and one third of the population) are unaccounted for in East Timor. Detailed sourcing is provided in the original material. This summary was produced by T.I.S.

Since the first days of the Indonesian invasion of East Timor in December 1975, there has been a steady flow of information indicating a large and increasing death toll in the territory. Less than one year after the invasion, church sources in Dili estimated that the number of people killed may have reached 100,000. By the latter half of 1979, Timorese church sources were saying in private conversation that at least 100,000 and perhaps as many as 200,000–300,000 East Timorese have died since the invasion began.

These estimates are not based on population counts. They arise from observations of people who have lived in East Timor during four years of war. The estimates are supported by the many reports from other Timorese (both Fretilin and non-Fretilin) of widespread killing in the early period of the invasion. The findings of an International Red Cross (ICRC) survey in July 1979 and Australian journalist Peter Rodgers in October, back up the 1979 ACFOA report "Aid and East Timor" which showed that a large proportion of East Timor's population was in an emergency situation and many had died of disease and starvation in the countryside and in Indonesian controlled 'refugee' or 'resettlement' camps.

Reports by East Timorese on the number of deaths in their country were given credence in October 1979 when Peter Rodgers calculated that the population had declined by about 100,000. Rodger's estimates were based on official population figures released by the Indonesian-controlled Provincial government in Dili. In fact, Rodgers appears to have underestimated the number of deaths these figures may indicate.

How many people are missing?

The official Indonesian figures supplied to Rodgers in October 1979 put East Timor's population at 522,433. The exact population of East Timor before the invasion is not known but according to official Portuguese and East Timor church figures, it was in the range of 663,000–700,000 in 1975. The short civil war in East Timor during August/September 1975 effectively caused a 7,000 decrease in population (4,000 refugees who never returned and up to 3,000 deaths – see discussion below). If we subtract this number from the 1975 population figures, we are left with a population in East Timor, after the civil war but before the invasion, of 656,000–693,000.

Comparing those figures with the 523,000 figure supplied to Peter Rodgers, the population in 1979 appears to be about 133,000–170,000 less than it was in 1975 before the invasion. However, there are three obvious reasons why we cannot conclude that this is the number of people who have died since the invasion:

- It is not clear how accurate the Indonesian population estimate actually is. In June 1979, a Timorese source was provided with some official figures which, when totalled, put the population at 523,000, almost the same as that given to Rodgers in October. The June figures, provided on a district by district basis were almost all "rounded-off" to the nearest thousand and, more questionably, eight of the districts were shown to have a population of exactly 30,000 (see map). If the figures supplied to Rodgers were these same June figures, there must be some doubt about their accuracy.
- A population census by Indonesian authorities would include only those East Timorese directly accessible to the Indonesian government. When Rodgers was provided with the population figures, he was also told by Indonesian military officials that there were 300-600 "Fretilin members" in the Eastern part of the territory. Given the Indonesian government's record over the last four years of drastically understating the number of Timorese outside their control, there would certainly be many more than 300-600 people not included in the population count. Until it is known how many East Timorese were *not* counted, it is impossible to determine from these official figures how many people have died.
- Subtracting the 1979 figure from the 1975 population figure to determine the number of missing East Timorese takes no account of births since 1975. In the 1950s and 60s, East Timor's population grew at a rate of 1.7 per cent per

year. If life in East Timor during the period 1975-79 had been close to normal, the population should have increased to about 700,000–740,000. Against this figure, the 1979 Indonesian population figures would indicate that 177,000–217,000 people were missing. However, there is no doubt that conditions in East Timor during 1975-79 were far from 'normal' but information on the effects of killings, starvation and disease on birth rates etc. is not available. Therefore, while it is currently impossible to quantify, 'population growth' after 1975 has to be taken into consideration.

What then, do the 1979 population figures show?

We have seen that there may be some doubt about the accuracy of the Indonesian government's 1979 population figure for East Timor (approx. 523,000). Whether or not it is accurate, if it is compared with the pre-invasion *1975* population level, it leaves 133,000–170,000 East Timorese unaccounted for. Although we are not able to quantify 'population growth' after 1975, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the actual number of 'missing' East Timorese is *at least* 133,000–170,000 and could be as high as 177,000–217,000. However, until we know how many East Timorese remain outside Indonesian control (and hence not counted in Indonesian population surveys), we cannot deduce from these figures alone, how many East Timorese have actually died since the invasion.

Why are Peter Rodgers' calculations an underestimate?

How is it possible to conclude that the number of people missing may be twice that calculated by Rodgers, given that we have used the same Indonesian population figure? The reasons are simple:

Firstly, Rodgers relies exclusively on Portuguese government figures for his 1975 population level. However, there is evidence that these figures underestimate the actual population because some Timorese avoided the Portuguese census counts in order to evade colonial taxes. For this reason, we have given the 1975 population as a range between the Portuguese figure (663,000) and Catholic Church estimates (700,000).

Secondly, Rodgers appears to give credence to reports that there may be as many as 25,000 East Timorese in West Timor, where they fled during the 1975 civil war. Rodgers has not seen these refugees, nor have there been any consistent first-hand accounts of their presence in West Timor since 1976. According to well-placed East Timorese, West Timorese and Jakarta church sources, most if not all refugees who went to West Timor in 1975 have returned to East Timor (with the exception of 1400 who went to Portugal in late 1976). Until the presence of East Timorese in West Timor is confirmed, Rodgers' use of them in calculations about population must remain doubtful and, for this reason, we have exc ed them from our estimates.

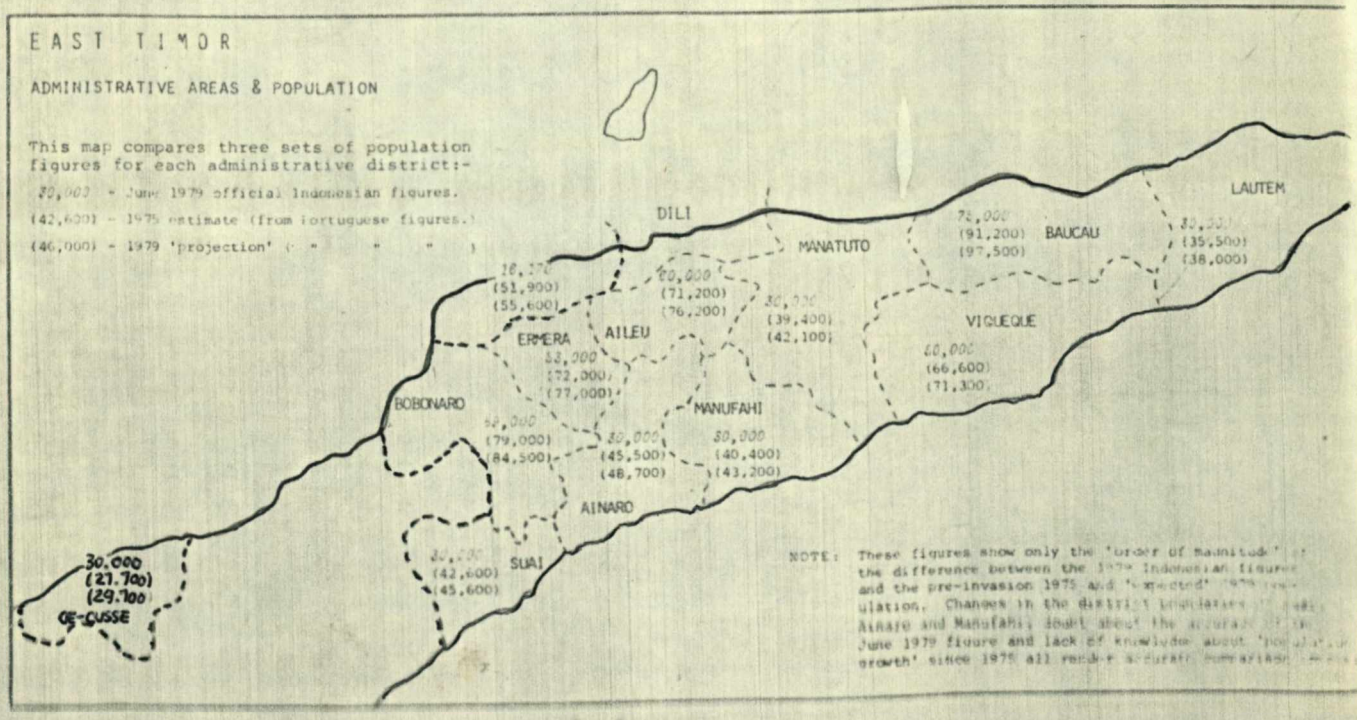
The third reason why Rodge calculations are probably an unc estimate is that he does not, as have done here, take into accou any 'population growth' after 19

More recent Indonesian population figures. Are they credible?

Even though Rodgers estimate 100,000 deaths may be an under estimate, it is a shocking figure i any language. Not surprisingly, th Indonesian government has sough prove Rodgers' calculations wror and has subsequently issued thre new sets of population figures in a many months.

In November 1979, an Indones armed forces newspaper dispute Rodgers' report and claimed tha East Timor's population was reall 612,017. A month later, the Eas Timor military commander state that the population was 592,603 Then, in January 1980, US Congre men visiting East Timor were prese ted with a set of figures allegedly showing the population to be 598,603 (in fact, the figures provic totalled 589,782).

Why these three sets of figures a different from one another and so different from the figure of 523,000 supplied to Rodgers in lat October 1979 as "the results of a survey that has just been carried out", remains unexplained. These recent figures are even more suspec when reports from East Timor in-


EAST TIMOR
ADMINISTRATIVE AREAS & POPULATION
This map compares three sets of population figures for each administrative district:-
30,000 - June 1979 official Indonesian figures.
(42,600) - 1975 estimate (from Portuguese figures.)
(46,000) - 1979 'projection' (" " ")
DILI
MANATUTO
BAUCAU
LAUTEM
VIQUEQUE
AILEU
ERMERA
BOBONARO
MANUFAHI
AINARO
SUAI
OE-CUSSE
30,000
(27,700)
(29,700)
NOTE: These figures show only the 'order of magnitude' of the difference between the 1979 Indonesian figures and the pre-invasion 1975 and 'expected' 1979 population. Changes in the district boundaries [illegible] Ainaro and Manufahi, doubt about the accuracy of the June 1979 figure and lack of knowledge about 'population growth' since 1975 all render accurate comparisons [illegible]

dicate that the flow of East Timorese into Indonesian controlled areas has "slowed to a trickle" since April 1979. There have been no reports indicating the movement of 60,000–80,000 Timorese into Indonesian controlled areas since April '79, let alone since October 1979.

While these new sets of Indonesian population figures appear to be contrived, they still of course, leave enormous numbers of East Timorese unaccounted for.

How many deaths caused by the 1975 civil war?

Since Rodgers' October report, even the Australian government appears to accept the fact that large numbers of Timorese have died. However, at least one of its members, Michael MacKellar, has attempted to lay a significant part of the blame on the 1975 civil war. There is no reliable evidence to support such a claim.

The civil war began in mid-August 1975 and had all but ended within three weeks with occasional clashes occurring until the end of September 1975. According to ACFOA and ICRC estimates at the time, the number of deaths caused by fighting in the 1975 civil war was 1,500–3,000. Approximately 2,600 people fled to Australia at the height of the civil war. Of the thousands of people who crossed the border into West Timor at the same time, all but 1,400 who went to Portugal in 1976, appear to have returned to East Timor. So, the actual known decrease in East Timor's population, directly attributable to the 1975 civil war is only 7,000.

The only military activity in East Timor between late September and December 7, 1975 occurred in the border areas. These events involved incursions by Indonesian troops into, and naval and aerial bombardment of, East Timorese territory. The actual number of casualties sustained by both East Timorese military and civilians at that time was relatively low.

It has also been argued that the widespread starvation and disease seen in East Timor was a direct result of the civil war. It is true that the civil war did cause disruption of food supplies in some areas of East Timor, but according to the ACFOA team which visited the territory in October 1975 (*after* the civil war), the situation had not reached famine proportions and, in most areas, the 'subsistence economy' had proved war resistant.

By late November 1975, after almost three months of humanitarian aid programmes conducted by the ICRC, ASIAT and later, eight member agencies of ACFOA, the ICRC chief delegate, Andre Pasquier reported that there had been no cases of serious illness through starvation and "nobody in East Timor (was) starving to death".

Indonesian invasion responsible for many deaths

There seems little doubt that an enormous number of East Timorese have died since 1975. As we have seen, East Timorese living in the territory believe between 100,000 to 300,000 may have died in the last four years. Their claims appear to be supported by official Indonesian population figures released in Dili in late October 1979. These latter figures, while they cannot tell us exactly how many people have actually died, do indicate that at least 133,000–170,000 and perhaps as many as 177,000–217,000 remain unaccounted for. This represents between one fifth and one third of East Timor's population.

If the 1975 civil war can account for only a relatively small number of deaths, what is the reason for such a big number of deaths since then? People who have lived in East Timor for the past four years are in no doubt:

Since December 7, 1975, a wide spectrum of East Timorese have reported systematic killings, the 'wiping of villages off the map' and destruction of crops during Indonesian military operations in East Timor. Their reports have been publicised, but not widely or consistently in Australian and international media for East Timor has been, and essentially remains, closed to independent observers.

The Indonesian government refused to allow international relief organisations into East Timor for the first 3¾ years of its occupation of the territory. The destitute condition of East Timorese in Indonesian 'refugee' or 'resettlement' camps was known to Western governments almost one year before the ICRC and Catholic Relief Services were permitted to begin a relief operation. There seems little doubt that the starvation and disease seen in East Timor by the ICRC and CRS in 1979, was not caused by the civil war. It occurred after the Indonesian invasion and would have been exacerbated by the conscious exclusion of an international relief operation.

There is little point in arguing whether or not the Indonesian government *intended* to cause the death of a large number of Timorese to effect the integration of East Timor into Indonesia. There seems little doubt that the actions of the Indonesian military, as an invading and occupying force, *has* caused a large number of deaths and it is for this reason that East Timorese still do not accept the Indonesian presence in East Timor. O

The Human Toll of a World at War

In November, just before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Center for Defense Information, a nonprofit research organization with headquarters on Capitol Hill, published a survey of the world's current armed conflicts. It counted 37 such major and minor wars, involving more than 8 million soldiers and paramilitary fighters. "The total loss of lives in these conflicts is unknown," the center reported, "but rough estimates run between 1 and 5 million killed." The following were rated as the eight most violent wars:

Conflict	Number of Deaths	Year Started
1. Cambodia	500,000 to 4 million	1970
2. Afghanistan	100,000 to 250,000	1978
3. East Timor	100,000 or more	1975
4. Lebanon	50,000 or more	1975
5. Sino-Vietnamese war	30,000 or more	1979
6. Philippine guerrilla wars	30,000 or more	1972
7. Guatemala	22,000 or more	1967
8. Rhodesia	20,000 or more	1972

Washington Post, Jan 1980